

Ethic



By E. Lander Medlin

IN S P r a c t i c e

E thics – we hear about it, we talk about it, daily, at least the lapses. It touches our lives regularly in both positive and negative ways. So what is ethics anyway? How do we define it? Why is it so important? What is the basis for making ethical decisions? Without the sermon, how do we approach ethical situations or moral dilemmas in both meaningful and practical ways? These questions, among many others, will be explored throughout this article and further in a chapter slated for APPA's Body of Knowledge (BOK), the digitally revised version of the popular book *Facilities Management: A Manual for Plant Administration*.

In January 2000, C. David Lisman wrote an article for *Community College Journal* stating, "At the heart of competent *citizenship* is the capability of individuals to be ethical." Hence, I would suggest that at the heart of competent *leadership* is the capability of individuals to be ethical.

Some are uncomfortable with the thought that ethics does not consist of an *absolute* set of principles. Nonetheless, we can develop and utilize a reasonable set of guidelines for ethical behavior and action in the workplace. Given the workplace as the basis for discussion of these ethical principles and practices, it should also be reasonable to adopt the perspective that our moral point-of-view should concern actions and behaviors that serve the interests of that collective or the common good. This is important as it aids in the design and implementation of a framework of guiding principles and a set of practical questions we can use in making ethical decisions and taking action accordingly.

This basis also helps us address what is in the best interest of all concerned, since that may not align with our own specific or immediate needs and desires. Further, we need to be able to work together to support the good of all. Therefore, the basic premise is concerned with the good of others (the collective in this case) and not just for oneself.

In this way, we can demonstrate that leadership is a blend of both competence (job knowledge and skill) and character (high integrity and moral responsibility). Certainly we need relevant skills and knowledge (job competence) to succeed in the workplace. Arguably, we need high integrity and a strong moral fiber (character) to succeed as well.

This leads us to the topic of ethical behavior and ethics in the workplace and its importance in developing competent and capable leaders. As ethics requires paying special heed to both oneself as well as to others. It's a matter of balance. Unfortunately, the word "ethics" means different things to different people.

For purposes of this article, ethics is defined as a set of guidelines and/or rules for the conduct of individual behavior in an organization or civil society. This ethical code of conduct (as it is normally identified) is intended to guide policies, practices, and decision-making for employees on

behalf of the organization. Although easily stated, what does this really mean? Expanding on this definition, the FMI/CMAA Survey of Construction Industry Ethical Practices stated that ethics is:

- The discipline dealing with what is good and bad about moral duty and obligation
- A set of accepted moral principles and values about what ought to be
- A theory or system of moral principles governing the appropriate conduct for an individual or group
- A code of morality.

The words we actually use to define ethics have an intuitive meaning specific to each of us and around the knowledge of right and wrong – our morals. However, we need clarity and a common or shared understanding of such terms if we expect to communicate in meaningful ways on such a complicated topic. Otherwise, the subject quickly gets muddy and murky further complicating matters and the decision-making process. The terms and their definitions surrounding ethics are loaded with ambiguity, have different meanings for different people, and raise even more questions complicating matters even further.

Nevertheless, the ethical behavior of individuals and their organizations is extremely important, if not essential, for an orga-

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nization's long-term integrity and to build an environment of trust. Both the individual and an organization's reputation (its brand value) is based on trust and integrity. The role of top leadership in setting the tone and modeling ethical behavior (what one does, not just what one says) is critical in making ethics part of the organizational culture, creating a trust environment, and ensuring ethical behavior is an ongoing requirement. Remember, trust is built slowly, one day at a time, but can be destroyed in a matter of moments.

PERCEPTION – ITS LIMITATIONS

Our perception of the world around us is created from our experiences, parental upbringing, educational attainment, cultural background, our morals, and our values. This perception is formed from our paradigm(s), i.e., the mental map of how we see the world; our world view. No matter what our circumstances, our individual paradigms are limited and incomplete. We all have blind spots. Therefore, looking at the world through our individual lenses invariably has significant drawbacks. If we are not careful, we will tend toward making decisions based only on our point of view or our own perspective.

PERSPECTIVE – ITS IMPORTANCE

However, if we understand the fact that *people see what they believe*, we can quickly see the limitations of looking at the world through our own limited perspective. It is through the power of shared perspectives that we gain so much for our organizations and begin to create the real possibility of establishing open and shared channels of communication and establish opportunities for deep collaboration, which are critical elements in creating an environment of trust. We are less apt to dismiss or judge/misjudge others' perspectives if we are open to our differences and the perspectives they foster and engender. By doing so, we are able to look at problems and issues through a variety of different lenses.

PRINCIPLES – A FOUNDATIONAL FRAMEWORK

When considering ethical issues or dilemmas, it is important to establish a consistent and predictable framework of foundational principles. And, it is equally important to recognize there is a difference between values and principles. Values represent social norms, are personal, emotional, subjective, and arguable. Whereas principles represent natural laws, are impersonal, factual, objective, and self-evident. Therefore, principles stand the test of time and govern behavior with a resultant set of consequences whether we agree or disagree. This distinction may seem minor, but is critically important to ensure the organization and the collective it represents is focused on and working from a set of unarguable and objective foundational principles

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as their guide. Hopefully one's personal values align with these overarching principles. And, although one might argue about the specific details surrounding each of the principles, in the main they are indeed self-evident.

From much of the literature on this subject, six foundational principles emerge and form the basis of this framework. They are:

- *Trustworthiness, Honesty, and Personal Integrity* – the most important, first and foremost, of all the principles; without it, all the others fall apart.
- *Responsibility for Self* – where character is built from the inside-out, day-in and day-out; and where substance trumps symbolism every time.
- *Freedom of Thought and Choice* – where questions are encouraged and openness in decision-making is valued.
- *Being Equitable, Just, and/or Fair* – which is critically important that individuals in the organization feel they are treated in a *just* manner and will receive fair treatment whether they agree with the decision(s) or not.
- *Respect and Caring for Others* – where compassion and mercy reign in establishing sincere and genuine understanding which inspires trust and fosters openness.
- *Respect for Human Rights and Dignity* – where one hopes that universal law will outweigh outdated, societal norms and humility is ever-present.

PRACTICAL QUESTIONS – A TOOL FOR DECISION-MAKING

Ten questions have been formulated from the myriad questions found in the literature on this subject. These types of questions can and should be used regularly to address any given ethical issue or dilemma that arises in the organization. They are:

1. *What is the dilemma, issue, or problem?* Although the question sounds too basic, it is extremely important to define the problem accurately and assemble all the facts immediately at hand. This way you know what you don't know and, therefore, what you need to further examine. In addition, this effort helps to understand the context and history associated with the specific problem at hand.
2. *Is it legal? Will I be violating either civil law or organization policy?* This question forces you to research the

actual legalities of the case and ensures you understand your own organization's policies. And, if you find your organization's policy is in some way unethical, you should seek to have it changed or modified.

3. ***How would you define the problem if you stood on the other side of the fence?*** Put yourself in the other parties' shoes. Doing so can enlighten your thinking and will illuminate others' perspectives.
4. ***What are the conflicting values and principles apparent in this situation?*** It is important to determine where personal values and organizational principles come into conflict. Identifying the conflicts help to smoke out the ethics of any situation. This effort sets the stage for identifying options and their consequences.

The engagement of all affected parties is often overlooked but critical to ensure there are little, if any, limitations of knowledge in your response or action.

5. What are the alternative courses of action/options? Forcing yourself and others to explore more than one alternative course of action helps open up the possibilities and ensures that all perspectives have been gathered for consideration.

6. What are the consequences, risks, and implications of each option?

Answering this question helps your further distinguish the most responsible course of action versus just taking the most expedient choice. It also highlights or discloses how others might be harmed by any particular course of action.

7. Can you discuss the problem with the affected parties before you make your decision? The engagement of all

affected parties is often overlooked but critical to ensure there are little, if any, limitations of knowledge in your response or action. Unfortunately, the pressure of time and the potential discomfort associated with this type of engagement all too often holds people back from having such a critical set of conversations as part of the fact-finding process.

8. Is it balanced? Is it fair to all concerned in the short term as well as the long term? When it comes to balance, it is important to ensure consistency and predictability so there is no confusion about the rules of the game. In addition, it has been said that time alters circumstances. You will want to make sure that you have assessed the situation and its circumstances such that your response/action will indeed stand the test of time.

9. How will the decision make you feel about yourself? Could you disclose, without qualms, your decision or action to your boss, other employees, the newspaper, your family? This is clearly the litmus test for any action you plan to take. There is a standard question that deserves repeating here: "Would you want your decision to appear on the front page of the *New York Times*?" This type of disclosure (or its real possibility) should give you cause



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for pause and ensure that your character and the reputation/brand of the organization is preserved.

10. What is your decision? In any case, we have to come to a final conclusion and render a response/action. It is important to ascertain not only what your decision is in the end but how it will be communicated.

PROCESSES – STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING AWARENESS & IMPROVING THE ETHICAL CLIMATE

Ultimately, it is important to put policies into practice and establish a process(s) to ensure broad knowledge of what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior and increase awareness of what constitutes ethics/ethical behavior in your organization. By implementing various strategies and publicizing them widely, you will be able to illuminate your policies and practices and further demonstrate commitment as an organization to ethical behavior and the creation of an ethical environment steeped in trust. Some strategies to consider are:

- Open up varying channels of communication on the topic
- Establish a hotline and/or website dedicated to or exclusively for this topic
- Discuss regularly at managers/staff meetings

- Establish these foundation principles and practical questions as a basis for handling ethical situations and conflicts
- Develop a code of conduct for your organization
- Conduct educational training sessions with all employees
- Establish an ethics officer or ombudsperson
- Establish an Ethics Advisory Committee

As you can readily see, a great deal of work is involved in establishing ethics as an explicit and implicit part of the organizational culture. And, don't underestimate the value of the organization's leadership serving as role models and guides and daily reminders of the importance of ethical behavior. Ultimately, it's not really about compliance or adherence to rules and legalities. It's about the character of your leadership, your perceived fairness, and ultimately the reputation you and your team build/earn over time. 

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